

From Horror to Hope in the Art of Sieg Maandag

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The visual art of Holocaust survivors is at the heart of current psychoanalytic theories around the uses of creativity in response to devastating trauma—from the simple expression, through aesthetic representation, of that which cannot be otherwise articulated, thought about or symbolized, to the reparation or even mastery of such experience through aesthetic transformation (Ornstein, 2006; Dreifuss-Kattan, 2016). An important contribution to this psychoanalytic discourse around the art of trauma is the work of Holocaust survivor and artist Sieg Maandag, brought to public attention via a recent monograph dedicated to his work (Skorczewski and Maandag-Ralph, 2020; Tutter, 2022¹). Remarkable for its magnitude and variety, Maandag's corpus offers many visceral expressions of horror and hopeless despair; but some of his later works signal the transformative hope and generativity that surely contributed to his ability to sustain enduring and nurturing adult relationships—let alone his survival as a human being.

Maandag lost his comfortable upper-middle class life in Amsterdam when, in 1943, his entire family was sent to the Westerbork transit camp, and thence to Bergen-Belsen. There, he lost his grandmother, who was sent to the Sobibor concentration camp, where she was murdered; next, he lost his father, who was sent to Sachsenhausen concentration camp, where he was murdered; and on the following day he lost his mother, who was sent to the Neuengamme work camp, and was presumed dead. After the liberation of Bergen-Belsen, the losses continued. Maandag and his sister were placed with an aunt's family, but they were shortly abandoned to an orphanage, where he was separated from his sister, who was transferred to a hospital after she was diagnosed with tuberculosis. He was rather miraculously reunited with his mother and sister, only to be sent to Switzerland for his health; his mother was likely not yet well enough herself to take care of her children. All these losses were incurred in the space of two years.

Every generation revisits the cultural products and forms of the past, which infiltrate and inhabit the fantasy life of the individual and cultural unconscious, where they are reimagined and reconfigured into new creative works that in turn inform a deeper understanding of their

¹ This essay is excerpted from a forthcoming article (Tutter, 2022).

predecessors in a continual, cyclical, reciprocal transformation (Borges, 1951; Tutter, 2015, 2020). The identification of art-historical references in selected individual works by Maandag—and, in particular, their revision and synthesis—marks his oeuvre as a transformative attempt at mastery of the cumulative traumas and traumatic losses that pressed for figurative and symbolic representation.

Maandag clearly looked at a lot of art and freely experimented with a variety of aesthetic styles, searching for idioms that could serve or facilitate as a means of expression. It is perhaps the influence of Edvard Munch that is most often and most clearly felt across Maandag's diverse oeuvre, legible in his loose brushstrokes, fluid line and color, and fantastical elements that exploit the creator's imaginative freedom. Like Maandag, Munch had his share of loss: he watched his mother die from tuberculosis when he was 5—the same age as Maandag when he was separated from his mother at Bergen-Belsen—and then watched his sister Sophie slowly succumb to the same disease, dying when he was 14. In accord, loss and the inexorable march of life toward death permeates Munch's oeuvre. A woman in red dances with a man at the center of *Dance of Life* (Fig 1); this avatar of the mature, fecund woman is flanked by two figures, representing her in the past (a virginal girl in white), and in the future (a mourning widow in black). It is sunset on the beach, a familiar theme for Munch; in the background, other couples are dancing.

Maandag's enigmatic late work, *The Invocation* (1996), formally recapitulates *Dance of Life*'s setting on the beach, as well as its regular foregrounded array of three figures, but here, three couples replace the central couple and accompanying two individuals (Fig 2). All face the sea in their backs turned to the viewer; invoking adding to its mystery, they all wear Elizabethan dress, the women in gowns and the men in breeches and hose; two of them motion toward the sea. The emphasis on the dancing couple in this otherwise enigmatic painting is amplified in Maandag's *Lovers' Dance*, which follows *The Invocation* by just a few years (1999; Fig 3). A man in a black shirt embraces a woman in a pale gown with flowing blonde hair; taller than her, he cranes his head down to her level, as if to better see her face as they dance. Like the earlier *Invocation*, *Lovers' Dance* also appears to draw on Munch's *Dance of Life*: its subjects' posture and dress echo the that of most prominent secondary grouping in *Dance of Life*, the couple that

dances next to the widow. Just as the man in black dips forward to meet his partner in a white dress, so, too, does Maandag's dancing man smile as he gazes tenderly at his partner. It is this loving connection of the couple that defines Maandag's "dance of life."

Dance of Life is not the only canvas by Munch that *Lover's Dance* appears to quote: its woman with the flowing blonde hair also evokes to the female figure in Munch's *The Separation*, a painting quite opposite in tone (Fig 4). Here, a young man in mourning black clutches his heart as he turns away from a ghostly woman with a featureless face who seems to head toward the sea, a gesture recapitulated by figures in *The Invocation*. The woman in *The Separation* also has long blonde hair; it swirls into the sky to meet the branches of the tree that shelter the sorrowful man, while the hem of her long pale-yellow dress flows along and melds with the long shoreline. Broken-hearted and forlorn, the man turns away as the woman is absorbed into the natural world, surrounding and anchoring him in with a grounding, cohesive force. The similar woman in *Lover's Dance* is not faceless and sepulchral, however, but vital and alive, and is simply reserving her visage for her lover's eyes.

Lover's Dance thus condenses Munch's grim dance and the forlorn specter of loss and sorrow into a redemptive, jubilant joining that celebrates the capacity for love and intimacy that mitigates and repairs the damage of catastrophic loss—indeed, that makes such works of art possible. Following the path of a great aesthetic tradition, Maandag's art travels from the reworking of trauma toward mastery, from alienation to intimate connection: if life is but an endgame, we may as well dance.

References

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Figures



Figure 1. Edvard Munch, *The Dance of Life*, 1899. Image:
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Dance_of_Life_%28painting%29#/media/File:Edvard_Munch_-_The_dance_of_life_\(1899-1900\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Dance_of_Life_%28painting%29#/media/File:Edvard_Munch_-_The_dance_of_life_(1899-1900).jpg)



Figure 2. Sieg Maandag, *The Invocation*, 1996; image, courtesy K. Maangag-Ralph.



Figure 3. Sieg Maandag, *Lovers' Dance*, 1999; image, courtesy K. Maangag-Ralph.



Figure 4, Edvard Munch, *The Separation*, 1896.; image, <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/separation/-AFoDHxU1msdjw>